

BOOK REVIEW

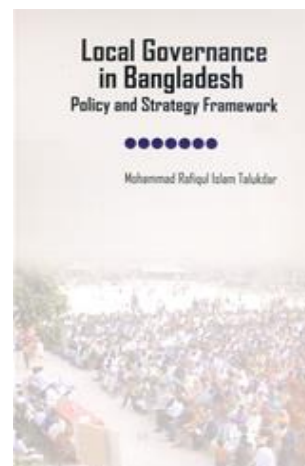
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Local Governance in Bangladesh: Policy and Strategy Framework by Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar

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The author argued that the absence of a local governance policy is a priority governance problem in Bangladesh, which affects effective implementation of decentralisation policies and programmes sporadically undertaken from time to time. Democratic decentralisation in line with fiscal autonomy and local administrative reforms have been in limbo for over three decades. The absence of a clear policy affects institutional linkages of the local government bodies. In some cases overlapping of functions are evidenced in different local government institutions, while in other cases lack of coordination and inter-agency cooperation are also evident. More importantly, unless Bangladesh does develop an aggregated local governance policy, it will not have a vision and road map for development of local governance.

The book consists of seven chapters. Following an introduction, chapter two provides ‘SWOT Analysis’ in its three sub-chapters: it deals with internal analysis that includes analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the ‘Local Government Division’ (under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives), opportunities and threats analysis of the external environment, and SWOT perspective of the policy. Chapter 3 starts with a stakeholder matrix and the analysis identifies forces for and against the local governance policy design. It also incorporates a framework of the policy and design, and its advocacy as well as implementation strategy.

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In Chapter 4, 'Local Governance in Bangladesh' focuses on how the current paradigm of decentralisation opens avenues for the development of democratic local governance. In order to get the proper outcome local government must be responsive to citizen needs and gain the authority, resources and skills needed to be operative and accountable. The author argues that the constitutional commitment as well as the spirit, as enshrined in the constitution in Bangladesh, has never been made into reality. The power of the local government, national–local relationships, degree of democratic and fiscal decentralisation, and functions, as well as functionaries of the local government are not clearly included in the devolution package as directed in the constitution.

Chapter 5, 'Local Governance Policy', has two sub-chapters: proposed policy and policy framework. According to the author, the purpose of this policy is to develop a fully decentralised local government system at all spheres of the local administrative units so as to ensure full-fledged democracy and good local governance through citizen engagement, inclusiveness and empowerment. The goal is to guarantee that local governance policy will be implemented in the form of laws by 2018, and to ensure that the public services delivery will be made available with a fully decentralised approach by 2020, so as to meet civic satisfaction and needs without irrational system loss or corrupt practices. The overall objective of the policy is to facilitate political, economic, social, administrative and developmental empowerment of local citizens to make sure they attain the rights to development and public services, and set access to knowledge and information. As per the proposed policy, there will be two types of local government institutions in Bangladesh, namely rural local government institutions and urban local government institutions under a total of eight regional local government commissions and one national local government commission. The particular 'Division' of the ministry would no longer be treated as administrative authority of local government as it undermines the constitution. Importantly, rural local government and urban local government units will never be geographically overlapped, which means that the rural local government units and urban local government units must have separate constituencies with clear-cut area mapping, but interfacing of rural–urban service delivery in particular should be appropriately harmonised. The author suggests functions, finance and functionaries must be aligned to make democratic local governance process successful. The author also recommends the Local Government Division to be down-sized with limited responsibilities.

Chapter 6, 'Policy Implementation Strategy' deals with the strategic implementation plan, which is essentially a management tool for policy to be measured and/or quantified followed by a package of procedures and actions. This is designed to assist concerned departments, commissions and agencies to manage and monitor implementation effectively. Once the policy is approved, focus must go to the strategic implementation plan, and on executing and monitoring the policy implementation process by

the concerned departments, commissions and agencies. The author further argues that the policy implementation plan must be scalable and flexible, and it is expected to reflect the degree of exigency, urgency, innovation, complexity and/or sensitivity associated with the concerned policy appraisal.

In conclusion, the author points out the fact that the study reveals one major political party alone cannot strengthen the local government institutions in Bangladesh because one political regime is too short to garner durable results in this domain. A consensus across the political regimes are needed for which local government associations and other civil society organisations should have to make concerted efforts. The book contains lots of very substantive new thinking which the policy makers can consider. The work certainly made an interesting and useful contribution to the existing body of knowledge in local government.